



for parents and teachers of children with Learning Disabilities

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

© 2006 Lynn Gould BA, DE, FDE (Remedial)

Your child may be one of millions worldwide who has been diagnosed with a learning disability. He* may be struggling to cope with the demands of school and experiencing failure at every turn, despite his best efforts. As his parent, you probably feel helpless, overwhelmed and frustrated, as you search for answers. *How can I help my child? What do we do now?* While your life seems to



have turned upside down and the future looks daunting, there is hope – your LD child *can* learn. But he cannot do it alone. He needs you to make the difference in his life.

Helping a child with a learning disability is a team effort involving parents, teachers and the school, and often consultations with doctors, psychologists, remedial therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists. You must be prepared to work together with all involved to create a plan suitable for your child.

The information that follows might be useful in helping you decide how best you can help your child.

1. ASSESSMENTS

It is important to have your child assessed by a professional to determine exactly what his difficulties are and how severe they are. The assessment provides a basis for making educational recommendations and determines the baseline from which remediation programs can begin. Once this is known, you can move forward in finding the right help for him.

Psychological Assessment

An assessment by an educational psychologist will determine your child's learning potential, his Intelligence Quotient (IQ). There is much debate over whether a child's intelligence is measurable or not, but this assessment should be seen as a guide, rather than an absolute. Generally, his IQ will fall within one of these ranges: below average, average, above average. An LD child usually has average to above average intelligence. It is generally accepted that a

child with a below average IQ has other factors causing his inability to learn and remedial support will only be effective for this child up to a certain point. The psychologist will also be able to determine whether your child has a learning disability and in which areas the weaknesses lie.

Scholastic Assessment

This assessment can be done by the psychologist or by a remedial therapist. It will determine the actual age your child is performing at – his current reading, spelling and mathematics ages. It provides a starting point for remedial therapy and indicates the extent of the problem. For example, an eleven year old who has a reading age of seven years needs long-term remedial support to close the four-year gap. The assessment also provides information about the nature of the problems – whether they are visual or auditory and which perceptual skills are in need of remediation.

Others

Often the above assessments indicate a need for the following:

- **Occupational Therapy Assessment** for children who show signs of NLD (non-verbal learning disorder: problems with gross and fine motor coordination, visual-spatial organization or non-verbal communication), motor disabilities or visual perception disabilities;
- **Physiotherapy Assessment** for children who show signs of NLD and motor disabilities;
- **Speech and Language Therapy Assessment** for children with specific language difficulties and auditory perception disabilities.

2. CONTACT WITH THE SCHOOL

Make sure that your child's school is aware of his learning difficulties and that he is adequately accommodated for in the classroom. Copies of all assessments and reports should be handed to your child's school for their perusal. Once they have been reviewed, the school's Support Team should meet to discuss the way forward in helping your child at school.

Individual Education Program

Our current education system in South Africa encourages the Individual Education Program (IEP) for children who need learning support within the classroom. The IEP describes your child's unique needs and the special services that will be provided to meet those needs, for example, lessons with the remedial teacher during school hours. The IEP should also include systems to accommodate his LD in the classroom. For example, if your child cannot finish his work in the given time, he should be allowed to work out, for example, five instead of ten sums in a lesson. If reading aloud in front of the class causes him anxiety and embarrassment, he should be allowed to read only to the teacher. Perhaps you can record his reading material (notes, tests, comprehensions, etc.) onto tape for him to play back in class when needed. Extra time in tests or examinations should be allowed. Perhaps he should be allowed to use a

calculator in mathematics. Whatever accommodations are needed for him to be able to learn properly should be put into action without delay.

Learning Support

In many mainstream schools there is a remedial teacher who works with children identified as having LD or in need of extra learning support. This teacher usually works in small groups and, depending on her workload, will probably see each child for a lesson once or twice a week. This amount of therapy is totally insufficient for an LD child to overcome his problems and private tuition by a remedial specialist is usually necessary.

Regular feedback

Keep in touch with your child's teacher. Get regular feedback on his progress and keep the teacher updated on what you're doing at home. Feedback ensures that the correct paths are being followed and that the most effective methods are being used. What isn't working well should be thrown out and different techniques tried. Remember that this is a team effort and everyone involved needs to be kept informed.

3. SCHOOLS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

If necessary, placement in a school for special educational needs may be recommended. These schools accommodate children who have severe LD and great difficulty learning properly in a mainstream school, and who need the learning support offered by these special schools. Most of the teachers in these schools are qualified remedial teachers, and often there are also qualified psychologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists available to address the needs of the children. Classes are small and the child's problems are thus able to be dealt with within the classroom. However, waiting lists for these special schools are usually very long. It may be many months before your child can be accepted by one of these schools.

4. REMEDIAL THERAPY / LEARNING SUPPORT

If your child is not making the necessary progress despite the support from school, you will have to seek private help. If you can afford regular remedial lessons with a remedial specialist, and you and your child have the necessary time available in the afternoons, then this should begin as soon as possible. It is very important to ensure that your child has a good intervention program, so, when choosing the right support for your child, you should bear the following in mind:

Remedial Lessons

- The purpose of remedial therapy is
 - to close the gaps in your child's learning through organised, consistent and repetitive teaching in the problem areas identified in the assessments;
 - to repair or rebuild your child's damaged self-esteem; and
 - to teach strategies for coping with future difficulties.

- Remedial support is far more than just extra lessons. Teaching must start at your child's *current performance level*, not at class level. This does not mean helping him with the comprehension he has for homework, but rather teaching him how to recognise sight words, how to decode difficult words, how to find contextual clues, and so on.
- Short (about 20 – 30 minutes) but frequent (every day) lessons are much more effective for retention of learning and far better for the attention and motivation of your child than just one or two hour-long sessions per week. However, if this is not possible, you should be given a program to work on with your child on the days that he is not at therapy.
- If at all possible, lesson times should not interfere with favourite extra-mural or afternoon activities. Your child's cooperation is an essential factor in the effectiveness of each lesson.
- Lessons should be varied, stimulating and motivating to maximise your child's attention and learning. A bored child will not learn anything and you are wasting your time and money if your child has to be forced to go to his remedial lessons.
- Make sure that lessons also include coping strategies; your child must be taught how to use his strengths to compensate for his weaknesses.
- The decision to have individual or group tuition should be based on the severity of your child's LD. Often a child needs the intense attention that only individual tuition can provide, but may be able to move on to group tuition as he makes progress.

Remedial Therapist

- If you are taking your child to private remedial lessons, ensure that the remedial teacher is qualified and experienced. It takes training to recognize problems and know how to deal with them effectively.
- There should be a good rapport between your child and the teacher. He should not feel anxious at all during lessons, but rather confident and accepted. Remember that building up his damaged self esteem is just as important as any other remedial task.
- The therapist should be sympathetic but firm. Very often LD child adopt a "can't do it" attitude, what's known as "learned helplessness", and use their disabilities to avoid certain tasks. A good remedial therapist will recognize this for what it is and not allow the child to get away with it.
- As previously stated, assessments are necessary and must form the basis for a plan of action. Once the therapist has assessed your child and determined the areas of weakness, she should put her findings and recommendations into a full written report for you. This report should be explained to you in detail at your initial consultation.
- The therapist should discuss with you the steps that she plans to take in helping your child. She should also provide you with a program for you to work on with your child at home – in between lessons – and progress should be regularly monitored.
- Frequent feedback, at least once a month, is important – make sure that this is part of the service you're paying for.

- Your child should not be reassessed for at least six months from the date of the initial assessment, preferably longer.

Beware of quick fixes, guaranteed success, gimmicky resources, etc. There is no magic cure for LD and remedial therapy is usually a long-term process, taking many months, sometimes years. Progress can seem extremely slow, even non-existent, and it is easy for you *and your child* to become disillusioned and to want to give up. But with each tiny step forward, help him to remember that “I am not yet where I want to be, but neither am I where I used to be.”

The longer your child continues to struggle and experience failure without receiving the appropriate intervention, the more likely it is that he will develop symptoms like anxiety, loss of confidence and low self-esteem. Without help, nearly 40 percent of children and adolescents with learning problems drop out of school. If you are worried about your child’s performance at school, it is essential that you seek *immediate* help. Delaying intervention has a snowball effect: the longer the problem is left alone, the wider the gap grows, the further behind your child lags, the bigger the problem becomes, the more difficult and more costly it is to remediate, the longer the period of therapy and the slower the progress. The best results are achieved with children whose problems have been identified and remediated early in their school career.



Sometimes, however, learning disabilities only become fully apparent from grade four onwards, as the demands at school change and the need for more independent work increases. But, whatever his age, your LD child *can* learn how to learn ... it’s never too late.

The Learning Workshop can help you and your child

Through the services of our full-time remedial specialist, The Learning Workshop is able to offer advice and support to parents who are struggling to understand and help their child with one of the most misunderstood conditions – learning disabilities. LD affects each individual differently, and treatment that works for a specific difficulty in one child, may not be work at all for another child. So, apart from loads of free advice and downloadable resources, The Learning Workshop also offers individual and personalized help in the form of the following services:

Counselling

Through emails our online remedial specialist is able to advise you on a range of topics related to LD. Some of the most popular questions relate to:

- * Effective nutrition treatment – what to eat and what to avoid

- * Proactive behaviour management – at home and at school
- * Parenting LD children – useful tips and strategies on living with LD at home
- * Teaching LD children – classroom management and accommodations
- * Activities and resources for remediating reading, spelling, writing and mathematics
- * Dyslexia
- * ADHD (Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder)
- * Medication treatment for ADHD – advantages and disadvantages, alternative options

Home Programs

While one-on-one support with a remedial specialist is the ideal, in reality, most parents cannot afford the time and expense of long-term private remedial lessons for their child. For those parents who are willing to help their own child themselves, The Learning Workshop offers an alternative solution in the form of **individualized home programs**. These programs are drawn up by our remedial specialist and are specific to each child's needs. Each program is filled with lessons, activities, worksheets, teaching suggestions, teaching aids, and advice and information relevant to the child's difficulties – enough to last for about one month, maybe longer, depending on the child's rate of progress. Progress is monitored and unlimited back up and support is offered while working on each program.

Workshop for Parents and Teachers

Many parents have requested a workshop to help them understand LD and to find out how they can help their own child. Some teachers who have not been trained in remedial education have also expressed a need for guidance. Up to now, this has been very difficult to arrange as our clients are scattered all over South Africa, and many are from overseas. So, to address this need, The Learning Workshop will be launching an **online Remedial Workshop in March 2006**. This Workshop will take the form of a number of modules, each module addressing a different aspect of LD with activities and resources for remediating each problem. You will be able to register for the whole workshop or just for the modules you choose. If you would like to be kept updated on this development, please send us your email address.

For more information on any of the services offered by The Learning Workshop, please email us at info@learning-workshop.co.za

** Although LD is most common among boys, it has the same impact on girls as it does on boys and the treatment is the same. For this reason, the terms he and she are interchangeable – the one implies the other.*
